

Lake Erie Binational Public Forum



Photo: FOCAL Erie

Section 8: The Lake Erie Binational Public Forum

[This section was prepared with substantial input from the Lake Erie Forum. In addition to the Forum's role in supporting preparation and review of LaMP technical background documents, it highlights in particular the accomplishments of the various Lake Erie Forum Task Groups.]

8.1 Purpose

In 1993, the United States and Canada began planning for the Lake Erie Lakewide Management Plan (LaMP). Public participation in the development and implementation of the LaMP was recognized as a critical component in achieving the goals of the LaMP. The government agencies involved in the Lake Erie LaMP established the Lake Erie Binational Forum to provide a direct public link into the Lake Erie LaMP process.

The Lake Erie Binational Public Forum is a self-governing, self-directed, self-implementing group of Lake Erie basin citizens focused on the development of the Lake Erie LaMP. Forum members provide input on the planning and implementation of the LaMP, and provide a means of fostering effective two-way communication with the diverse population of the Lake Erie basin. Forum members come together three times annually, at locations around the basin, to work on tasks associated with the goals of the Lake Erie LaMP. Due to the widespread geographical representation of Forum members, meeting locations are alternated on each side of the border to eliminate any unfair travel burdens.

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8.2 Membership

The Forum is a binational group of individuals representing various interests and geographic areas from around the Lake Erie Basin. By bringing personal experience and talents to the table, Forum members provide a broad base of expertise that can be utilized to accomplish LaMP goals. Forum members represent a number of diverse interest areas, including the following:

Agriculture	Business and Industry
Community Organizations	Education
General Public	Environmental and Special Interest Groups
Sport & Commercial Fishing	Labor
Local Government	Public Health
Recreation and Tourism	

The Forum membership continues to change and grow over time and continues to seek interested, involved citizens to join this binational group. Procedures for becoming a member, recruiting new members, and the responsibilities and rights of members are under the guidance of the Forum's Membership Task Group.

8.3 Roles and Functions of the Forum

The following five concepts underlie all Forum roles and functions:

1. A successful Lake Erie LaMP must be consistent with the priorities of the citizens of the Lake Erie basin.
2. Implementation ultimately depends upon citizens' actions.
3. Government agencies need to effectively interact with a large number of basin residents and a diversity of interests.
4. The Lake Erie LaMP will be a model for how government and citizens will interact now and in the future.
5. The Forum will support the restoration of Lake Erie.

Roles and Functions

1. The Forum shall play a significant role in the LaMP process with real involvement and proactive initiatives by:
 - Acting as partners with governments and government agencies in goal setting and decision-making.
 - Assisting the LaMP technical subcommittees in drafting reports and reviewing Work Group documents before they go to the Management Committee for review.
 - Providing advice and input to the Work Group and Management Committee in developing and implementing the LaMP.
 - Promoting the Forum's vision and goals for Lake Erie.
2. Increase stakeholder participation in the LaMP process by:
 - Representing a variety of interest groups and geographic areas.
 - Identifying and involving stakeholders.
 - Bringing personal experience and talents to the process.
 - Taking information from the LaMP back to the community in a form that can be understood by the public.
3. Implement, facilitate and/or participate in Forum sponsored LaMP related activities at the local level, where appropriate.

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8.4 Vision and Mission

Vision:

A Lake Erie basin where diverse life forms exist in harmony, social and economic benefits co-exist at maximum sustainable levels, citizens and governments are committed to binational cooperation, and a philosophy of stewardship ensures a clean, safe environment.

Mission:

The Lake Erie Forum is a cooperative binational organization of diverse stakeholders whose objective is to restore, protect and utilize Lake Erie waters to achieve maximum sustainable social and economic benefits by promoting:

- Ecosystem health, diversity and stewardship;
- Recognition and protection of unique environmental areas, such as wetlands, wilderness and open space;
- Enhancement and maintenance of public access to the lake and shoreline;
- The protection of indigenous species and their habitats;
- Shoreline and lake uses which encourage a healthy economy and environment and are in the public interest; and
- Meaningful opportunity for public participation in decisions that affect the lake.

8.5 Ground Rules

One of the Forum's first tasks was the adoption of a number of organizational and procedural ground rules that are followed at Forum meetings. Organizational ground rules help to insure that meetings are run efficiently and effectively. These rules deal with such items as: time limits, specific agendas, consideration, confidentiality, and the preparedness of Forum members. Procedural ground rules address the formation and guidelines of task groups, the prioritization of issues, preparation of meeting minutes, timetables for material distribution, and other items that are important to meeting productivity. These rules, developed by Forum members themselves, have helped to provide a protocol and functional framework for meetings.

8.6 Forum Task Groups

In order to maximize efforts of the group, the Forum membership was broken down into a number of technical and non-technical task groups. Forum members selected membership on task groups based on their interest and expertise. The task groups have each developed their own objectives and action plans that are consistent with LaMP goals. Certain task groups such as Beneficial Use Impairment Assessment, Ecosystem Objectives, and Sources and Loadings, follow closely and in some cases work alongside, the LaMP technical subcommittees. Other task groups, including Land Use, Pollution Prevention, and Environmental Justice, were formed by the Forum in response to what was considered a gap or deficiency of the LaMP Work Group structure. The Human Health task group was also created to fill such a gap, but now works closely with the recently formed Human Health Subcommittee of the LaMP Work Group.

During each Forum meeting, time is set aside for both technical and non-technical task groups to deal with agenda items that they have determined to be important to their specific group. All task groups report back to the overall Forum, and seek the group's approval for proposed actions. The overall Forum is asked to vote on actions and proposals from the individual task groups. No task group is allowed to take action without the awareness and approval of the overall Forum. This format allows all Forum members to be aware of the work of individual task groups even though they do not sit on each of the twelve groups currently established.

Existing Task Groups:

- Beneficial Use Impairment Assessment
- Ecosystem Objectives
- Education and Outreach
- Environmental Justice
- Funding
- Human Health
- Internal Communications
- Land Use
- Membership
- Roles and Objectives
- Sources and Loadings
- Pollution Prevention

Of the twelve existing task groups, not all function continually or meet on a regular basis. For example, the Membership, Roles and Objectives, and Internal Communications groups were all much more active in the first few years of the Forum and are currently inactive.

8.7 Task Group Accomplishments

The following examples are provided to demonstrate some of the accomplishments of each of the task groups:

8.7.1 Beneficial Use Impairment Assessment

The Beneficial Use Impairment Assessment Task Group receives impairment assessment reports prepared by the Beneficial Use Impairment Assessment Technical Subcommittee. Members of the task group review the assessments and conclusions reached by the respective authors, discuss the report as a group during meetings or conference calls, and develop feedback and recommendations based upon both the technical accuracy of the report and the appropriateness of the impairment conclusion reached by the report's author. The group presents a summary of the report with recommendations concerning the impairment conclusions to the full Forum and the Forum is asked to accept/not accept the recommendations of the task group. In the event there are significant dissenting opinions, a minority opinion report is prepared and sent to the technical subcommittee and the Management Committee, along with the majority opinion. The task group's main difficulty for some of the assessment reviews was the length of time given the group to review the report, meet, and discuss the report prior to formulating the recommendations and reporting these to the entire Forum to gain consensus or develop constructive feedback.

8.7.2 Ecosystem Objectives

This task group follows closely the work of the Ecosystem Objectives Technical Subcommittee. Activities have included reviewing the development of the ecosystem model, providing feedback on the model's presentation to the public and communicating with the Forum.

8.7.3 Education and Outreach

The primary function of the Education and Outreach Task Group is to increase awareness of the LaMP and its activities, and educate the public with respect to their role in lakewide management and stewardship. In order to meet this objective, the group initiated a media campaign to inform newspaper, radio, and television stations throughout the basin about the LaMP and the work of the Binational Forum. The task group also organized an informational letter campaign to political representatives from both sides of the border. Most recently, the task group worked with Forum members to have them send personal messages along with the 1999 Status Report to interested political leaders and stakeholders around the basin. The task group also works closely with agency outreach specialists to review progress on educational publications, displays and the web page development.

8.7.4 Environmental Justice (EJ)

Environmental Justice is a term originating in the United States, which refers to the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. The environmental justice movement first emerged in the United States in the early 1980s, with an initial focus on concerns of minority populations over the siting of hazardous waste landfills in their communities. A broader debate over environmental justice issues resulted in Presidential Executive Order 12898 on environmental justice, which made this issue a priority for U.S. federal agencies. See Appendix C for more specific information on environmental justice.

The EJ Task Group was formed during the January 1998 Forum meeting. The primary catalyst for forming the task group was several Forum members' interest in educating environmental justice communities regarding existing fish consumption advisories. The goal of the task group is to acknowledge the unique characteristics of environmental justice communities, recognize the needs of these diverse populations, and share critical information pertaining to Lake Erie with these communities in such a way as to enhance their quality of life.

In September 1999, the EJ Task Group was successful in securing two grants, from U.S. EPA and from the George Gund Foundation, for development of fish consumption advisory

materials and outreach to low-income and minority communities along the Lake Erie shore. The goal of the project is to make available easy-to-read and culturally sensitive educational brochures and other materials, to alert at-risk families to the dangers of contaminated fish consumption and to provide positive alternatives for cooking, cleaning and selecting fish in order to decrease risk.

This project targets lower income, primarily minority communities in the Buffalo, Ashtabula, Cleveland, Sandusky, Toledo, and Detroit areas with proximity to fishable sites of demonstrated high toxicity levels. These communities have been shown to be more vulnerable to health risks due to: culturally or economically-based reliance on fish as a food source; lack of resources to access less contaminated fishing sites; culturally-based preferences for more highly contaminated species; educational disadvantages; and mistrust of, or lack of access to, traditional government fish consumption advisories.

Brochures, posters and site postings will be colorful and readable at an 8th grade level and will make use of local children's art. A recipe card, including a reiteration of the cooking and cleaning guidelines stated in the brochure, will be incorporated as a perforated attachment to a mail-back evaluation card. The brochure will be printed and ready for distribution by the start of the fishing season, in April 2000. The brochure will also be posted on the Lake Erie Forum's website, www.erieforum.org.

The Environmental Justice Task Group feels that more work needs to be done in the next phase of LaMP development to internalize environmental justice principles throughout the various actions of the LaMP. The task group is currently working on a separate report that will outline additional recommendations for LaMP actions to assist environmental justice communities in the Lake Erie basin.

8.7.5 Funding

The Funding Task Group's role is to seek funding on behalf of the Forum for administrative costs such as travel, mailings, the cost of publications, etc. The role of the task group also includes the following activities: 1) encouraging non-profit organizations, agencies and other organizations to apply for funding to carry out activities that would support the LaMP; 2) helping to coordinate LaMP-related activities among cooperating organizations; and 3) presenting to the Forum proposed resolutions of support for cooperating organizations' grant proposals.

8.7.6 Human Health

The Human Health Task Group was established in February 1999 and began discussions on mission, scope and framework for a study. An agency Human Health Subcommittee of the Lake Erie LaMP was authorized in March 1999 with representatives from U.S. EPA Region 5, Health Canada, and ATSDR, as well as three Forum members. The initial charge to the task group was to identify human health issues not addressed by beneficial use impairment assessment reports (BUIAs), to summarize evidence for human health effects, and to identify key considerations related to human health issues.

The task group and subcommittee reviewed the BUIAs, finding that they did not directly address human health exposure and impacts, nor did they discuss any relevant individual research studies. While the BUIAs indirectly measure human exposure and provide exposure data sources, there were no discussions of policy implications, detection limits, emerging issues (such as endocrine disrupters), environmental health pathways, and media relationships. Variations in risk analysis and risk based standards were identified as a concern.

The task group and subcommittee are developing a human health paper which will address the GLWQA Annex 2 requirement to provide a "definition of the threat to human health from critical pollutants," address human health issues not addressed in the BUIAs, and provide a mechanism for incorporating emerging health issues. The paper is to define relevant human health concepts, including the weight of evidence approach, describe human health objectives for Lake Erie, define pathways of exposure and associated critical pollutants, summarize the latest knowledge on health effects and identify data gaps. Implementation measures are to be identified as well as human health indicators for measuring progress.

8.7.7 Internal Communications

The Internal Communications Task Group's primary function is to facilitate efficient networking within the Forum membership and with associated agencies. The first task was to collect detailed information on the Forum's networking capabilities through a *Networking Survey*. In order to come full circle in the process, a communication system/database unique to the needs of Forum networking is being developed and will be added to the Lake Erie Forum's website.

8.7.8 Land Use

In recognition of the importance of changing land use practices around the basin to developing a LaMP for a healthy Lake Erie, the Land Use Task Group was formed. The primary objective of the task group is to educate local decision-makers and governments, state, federal and provincial agencies and the public about watershed management and stewardship ethics.

The task group is currently educating itself and the Forum on land use practices around the basin and seeking funding to develop information sharing possibilities and demonstration projects. Additional action items for the Land Use Task Group include: investigate opportunities for sharing information and positive results, including demonstrations, technical assistance and displays; investigate urban/urbanizing/industrial *good practices*; collect information on completed and ongoing projects, with the goal of producing a directory that could be made widely available; link existing projects and programs to the LaMP, including the identification of gaps and the integration of information from the RAPs; facilitate the flow of information across political borders; and learn about latest technologies being used for land use planning.

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8.7.9 Membership

This task group is currently inactive but originally played a role in developing guidelines and categories of Forum membership.

8.7.10 Roles and Objectives

The goal of the Roles and Objectives Task Group is to provide support in developing guidelines or procedures for the overall functioning and operation of the Forum. To date, the Roles and Objectives Task Group has drafted a vision and mission statement, both of which were adopted by the Forum. In addition, the task group has drafted a summary of the Forum's roles and function that was also adopted by the Forum.

8.7.11 Sources and Loadings

The Sources and Loadings Task Group follows closely the work of the Sources and Loads Technical Subcommittee. They are active in reviewing and providing constructive comments on subcommittee reports and in seeking the completion and publication of these documents. The objectives of this task group include: provide input to the technical subcommittee and review of decisions and documents; coordinate with the Pollution Prevention Task Group to develop pollution prevention strategies for targeted sources; and provide feedback and updates for the Forum.

8.7.12 Pollution Prevention

The primary function of this task group is to include pollution prevention as a component of the LaMP activities. To achieve that goal the task group has produced a concept paper defining what pollution prevention is and outlining its role in the LaMP process. This concept paper has been shared with the Forum and is currently under review.